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Alma Mater Matters: Exposing the Degree Mill Scam

Degree Mills: The Billion Dollar Industry That Has Sold Over a Million Fake Diplomas


This work is a clear, fact-oriented, and remarkably dispassionate treatment of a very disturbing subject: the sale and use of fake degrees, and the generally feeble response of legislators, law-enforcement agencies, employers, and educators.

Allen Ezell is a former FBI agent who founded the DipScam project in 1980, “the first and only time that a government agency attacked the problem” of fake degrees (16). DipScam ceased operating in 1991 when Mr. Ezell retired from the agency. John Bear is the author, along with his daughter, of Bears’ Guide to Degrees by Distance Learning and similar reference works. The authors point out that fake credentials have been with us for a very long time, but the rise of the Internet over the last ten to fifteen years has enabled this business to really thrive. The authors estimate that from 1995 to 2005, degree mills have made over a billion dollars’ worth of sales.

Probably the most extensive and lucrative degree mill is the “University Degree Program,” owned by an American and operating its websites and call centers in numerous other countries. It sells diplomas under the names of “Lafayette University,” “Northfield University,” “the University of Switzerland,” and dozens more. In addition to diplomas, the company provides transcripts, a degree-verification service for employers to call, and letters of recommendation. Ezell and Bear estimate that the company’s sales, mostly to American and Canadian customers, average more than $150,000 a day. Degree Mills includes the text of the company’s extensive telemarketing script, which the authors got in 2002 from a disgruntled employee.

According to a congressional study in 1986, the most recent year in which Congress examined the problem, approximately half a million Americans were actively using fake degrees (Americans who lie on their resumes, claiming legitimate degrees that they do not actually have, would form a separate group). The authors believe that almost all buyers of fake degrees do so knowingly, and use their degrees with deliberate intent to deceive. This book has been written for the much smaller number of people who are seeking a legitimate degree but lack the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate schools. Such naiveté may not be as ridiculous as we think. While many people know, for example, that legitimate schools are almost always accredited, they probably do not know that “there are nearly as many fake accrediting agencies as there are fake schools” (176). In addition, the increasing variety of online and other non-traditional forms of education makes judgment more difficult. One of the book’s appendices contains the first-person narrative of a woman named Laura Callahan, who resigned from a senior position in the Department of Homeland Security in 2004 after the media reported on her three degrees from Hamilton University, a degree mill in Wyoming. She maintains that she fully believed she was dealing with a legitimate school, and had no intent to deceive others. The authors stress that there is no definition that can perfectly distinguish a degree mill from a legitimate enterprise, since exceptions abound. Instead, they discuss five aspects of any school that should be considered: what credit is given for previous work or life experience, how much new work is required, how the quality of the new work is assessed, who makes these decisions, and who grants the degrees. The book also contains a detailed list of suggestions for “how to check out a school” (133 ff).

The book’s intended readership, however, is not primarily the small number of prospective students who need help avoiding what the authors call “less-than-wonderful” schools. Ezell and Bear have written this book for the general public, and especially for those who are in a position to do something once the extent and seriousness of the degree-mill problem is brought home to them. Why should we care about fake degrees? Without naming names, the authors list the circumstances of dozens of people who have used or are now using false credentials to fly airplanes, practice medicine, serve as
expert court witnesses, work as nuclear engineers, and perform many other critically important tasks in our society for which trust and real expertise are needed. The authors even mention someone serving as “head of a national crime organization” who holds a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in criminal justice—all of which are fake (269). Unfortunately, professors and academic administrators are not immune from the temptation, as Degree Mills makes clear.1

After the congressional hearing in 1986, several rather minimal recommendations were put forth, including the creation of a database of degree-mill information and a requirement that all federal agencies screen the credentials of their employees. These recommendations were not put into effect. The authors show that inaction, weak or non-existent laws, and disturbing rationalizations are the norm. Degree-mill operators can be charged under general fraud statutes, mostly commonly wire or mail fraud, but the penalties are usually weak. A small but growing number of states have passed legislation specifically prohibiting the purchase or use of fake degrees.

According to the authors, the job-hunting website Monster.com currently lists thousands of resumes containing degrees from known degree mills. Educause, which supplies the .edu domain name, does not restrict that domain to legitimate schools only. Along with many other mainstream magazines and newspapers, the Economist regularly sells degree-mill advertising. When Ezell and Bear called the Economist to discuss the ads that appear in this magazine, they were told, “Our readers are smart enough to make their own decisions” (121).2

The authors point out that there have been only three other books published in the United States on degree mills, in 1963, 1986, and 1990, and that academic research on this topic is almost non-existent. Degree Mills suggests many recommendations for action, and notes that after John Bear published an article on this subject in University Business magazine several years ago, “there were perhaps a dozen letters to the editor received from university presidents, all of them of the ‘They should do something!’ variety” (179). Ezell and Bear no doubt hope that the information contained in Degree Mills will not only spur Them to act, but cause each of us to determine what we can do also.